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ABSTRACT

Caregiver-infant interactions in the first years of a child's life provide models and shape patterns of responding that can have consequences throughout the life-span. Research and practice have produced knowledge about the sensitivity of outcomes to characteristics of the infant nurturing situation. Infant caregivers should accept babies' need for sensuous stimulation and intimate relationships. The curriculum for infant caregiving should be embedded in the innumerable daily acts of caring that allow infants' bodies to settle into easy rhythms. Sensorimotor skill building, and, later, preoperational skill building should be done in a sensitive manner so that infants and toddlers are lured, not pushed, into learnings. Language richness should permeate a baby's day. The infant or toddler's environment must provide safe places for the infants to run, crawl, and gallop about. Discipline in infant caregiving requires that conditions be arranged so that babies are kept as comfortable as possible. Discipline for toddlers may involve arranging the environment so that no-nos are infrequent. To provide an optimal developmental situation for each child, caregivers should hone their "noticing skills" to detect the ways in which each early learner markedly differs from others. (RH)

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Quality Infant/Toddler Caregiving

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It is curious and interesting that the impact of infant/toddler experiences during the first three years of life may be mostly lost to conscious memory or to recall. Yet the quality, contingent responsiveness and temporal patterning of those experiences may be influential in whether or not a person will manage successful marriage and parenting experiences and will be a congenial colleague or difficult worker in whatever human enterprise he or she is engaged. This statement is not made in order to dismiss the importance of the later years of life, with unexpected heartache or fortunate facilitations of the learning, work and family functioning of an individual.

The first years of life provide models and shape patterns of responding to others that can evoke friendship or avoidance, ease of companionship or angry responses, genuine interest in others or indifference. These patterns are internalized and then constructed by the infant and toddler as they experience intimate interpersonal relationships with those who care for them. Particularly important are the primary caregivers of infants.

Research on attachment theory has been especially useful in illuminating the links between early ministrations, caregiving responsiveness to infant distress, quality of tender holding, promptness of meeting needs for nurture or comfort, and in general, the depressed or joyous quality of the glancing games, cooing turns and myriad of wordless body communication games that are played out as adults feed, diaper, and soothe infants (Bretherton & Waters, 1986).

These early communication patterns, of course, do not impinge on a tabula rasa. Each baby brings to its caregiver the facial and body forms, coloring, features, and temperament patterns that have strong genetic determination. We know from the work of Thomas, Chess and Birch (1968), that infants may show predominantly either a pattern of easy accommodation to bodily rhythms of feeding and voiding and settling after soothing, or a pattern of slow-to-warm-up suspiciousness in accepting caring from a stranger, or soothing in daily rituals of feeding or bathing or cleaning up that differ from familiar patterns. The third predominant pattern includes a triggery irritability that may set the hyper responsive infant or toddler into torrents of tears, into intense temper tantrums if frustrations or unexpected changes arise in daily routines.

Yet even these temperament differences may not have the awesome consequence for later intimate interactions, friendship patterns and classroom accomplishment that caregiver-infant interations have. Crockenberg's (1981) work, for example, shows that although irritable, intense infants are more difficult to care for, if their mothers have sufficient support from a loving spouse and from friends and neighbors, for example, then chances are that this baby will form as secure an attachment to mother as a more easy going infant. Only when mothers were lacking in

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intimate social supports did the probability of an insecure attachment for a highly irritable baby increase.

The measurement of security of attachment, and the discovery of sequelae of quality of attachment have been goals of research in the infancy field that have yielded rich understandings of the importance of the early years. Only as longitudinal studies continue to follow up infants of differing patterns of attachment with primary caregiver, or differing environments (such as family or group day care during the first years of life) have we begun to see more clearly the power of the earliest years to shape probabilities for successful human living in intimate relationships with family, peers, teachers, and others (Bretherton & Waters, 1986).

From the researches of the past decades, and from the intensive experiences of research-based service programs that have worked hard to evolve high quality care for children under three years, ideas that work have become available (Honig & Lally, 1982). Even as we are cautious about extrapolating from these programs which had short days (not 10 hours!) for younger babies and provided ongoing intensive training for caregivers, we can still share our experiences. What, then have we learned from research, practice and theorists particularly Erikson, Mahler & Piaget?

Intimacy

Dancing the duet of giving and getting in infant nurturing requires the commitment of both partners - but the adult caregiver needs to be the skillful initiator. It is the adult "expert" partner who imbues an ealy relationship with the somatic certainty of daily rhythms. Creating a meaningful harmony of body touches and interchanges so intrinsic to infant caregiving requires a radically different view in selecting and training quality caregivers of infants and toddlers in comparison to caregivers of preschoolers. Furman (1986) in her perceptive book for nursery teachers, advises that preschool teachers should leave sensuous and intimate relationships to parents. But for babies, such relations are integral to their well being and the development of basic trust in caregiving persons. Thus, quality infant/toddler caregivers need to be relaxed and accepting of babies' sensuous nature in intimate ministrations such as feeding, burping, cuddling, diapering and body draping. Caregivers need to be attuned and responsive to vocalizations and early opportunities for "turn-taking talk" (Honig, 1986). The ways in which caregivers handle the seesawing braveries and retreats of no-saying toddlers will confirm the OK quality of early toddler autonomy efforts. Adults need to convey a sure sense that they are still available for free hugs and as a source of refueling for toddler emotional security.

Once caregivers have internalized the basics - the need for attunement, for body loving, for admiring glances and words, for focused attentiveness and gentle tempos, for providing somatic certainty and security to the patterns of days and ways, what then? What games and activities are appropriate for babies?

Curriculum for infant caregiving needs to be embedded as much as possible in the innumberable daily acts of kindness,

caring, leisurely holding and ministering that allow infants' bodies to settle into easy rather than uneasy rhythms. Wherever sleep or bowels or feelings become distressed, then ministering to the emotional well being of infants comes first. Curriculum, however, can enhance the pleasure and cognitive nourishment of the everyday interactions of adults caring for little ones. For example, object permanence is best learned in infinite varieties of the pleasureful peek a boo game. Spatial and causal understandings are richly learned as the caregiver arranges the environment and provides toys and materials judiciously so that infant explorations on their own evoke early learning of how things work. Causality and means-ends relationships, however, will not be learned if the toys or experiences provided are too frustrating. Thus, "matchmaking" is all important (Honig, 1983). Provision of opportunities to learn that are just right - not too hard, not too easy - for each particular baby will be the best guarantors that the baby's own developing passionate curiosity about how the world of objects and people works will motivate the mastery of new understandings and skills.

Sensorimotor skill building, and later, preoperational skill building should be done sensitively, so that infants and toddlers are lured, not pushed, into learnings. This means that infant educators have to understand the development of early schemas and how adults can create opportunities for practice. Buying colorful toys is not enough. Having insight into what and how babies learn is crucial.

Caregivers who feel challenged with each new baby to invent new ways to evoke pleasureful early learning will create curricular games and modify them so that early learnings occur most harmoniously in tune with the baby's own interests, gifts and tempos. Children enjoy particularly what is important to them. No toys can be as interesting as kitchen pots and pans, the clothing we put on babies, or the ordinary equipment we use in caregiving routines. Empty boxes from dog food (with a dog's picture) or spaghetti (with a pasta picture) may evoke more pleasure in learning to recognize two-dimensional symbols than any flash cards of circles or squares.

Language

Language richness should permeate a baby's day. Singing and crooning and chanting games help babies enjoy language fully. Parallel talk - labelling what the baby is feeling or doing - is a fine technique for teaching words. Self-talk as we go about our caregiving and describe what we are doing and why in easy terms is another good idea. Rhymes are fun for older babies. Reading should be an intimate, snuggly, sensuous, and leisurely shared activity. Hook your baby on books! Make them book addicts who need a read every once in a while as much as they need a feed!

Motoric Skills

Some toddlers are fierce bundles of physical energy. They squirm and move and wriggle and run. Some are quieter. Where infants need to move, the infant/toddler environment must provide safe spaces to slither, run, slide, crawl, and gallop about.

For some young ones, acting out stories will help keep their

interest and their involvement in a story time. Choose stories for calming and stories for acting out. The quality caregiver has an adult mind in motion. He or she is always thinking about what ways are best to engage or soothe or lure a baby forward developmentally. The quality caregiver actively searches for innovative solutions to problems.

Discipline

Discipline of infants means that we arrange conditions so that babies are kept as comfortable and cherished as possible. Discipline for toddlers may mean arranging the environment so that no-nos are infrequent. It may mean redirecting an overly exuberant attempt to pick up a fellow toddler who has tumbled and protests loudly at being dragged up by a peer. Refocusing a toddler on more appropriate activities can often help defuse behaviorally unacceptable situations. Helping toddlers see that others have feelings and that certain actions hurt or help is important. Using adjectives such as gently, slowly, easy can help slow down a toddler so that an activity becomes more acceptable. The power of modeling will help a toddler learn to imitate prosocial rather than agonistic acts. The more reassuring our explanations and words, the more surely will little ones pick up from us ways to handle conflicts that involve helping not hurting others.

Observation Skills

Quality infant/toddler caregiving depends fundamentally on superbly attuned adults who care about babies, adults who care about learning to know and understand and help babies on their ways toward optimal development. Willingness to see with fresh eyes the ways in which each baby learns, responds, is comforted, pleasured, is shy or impulsive can help the caregiver tune in more effectively to meet the needs of each individual child. Early learning careers differ markedly. The generosity of caregivers in allowing each baby to be a separate and unique learners will go far toward ensuring a quality curriculum and environment. Noticing skills can be honed with good will and practice.

Conclusion

The more we learn about babies the more adequate will be our responses and our ability to help each infant move toward the separations and individuations, the achievement of Mahlerian constancy, the internalization of trust and a firm pride of self that augur well for the positive emotional foundation for other learnings.

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